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Caught in the Low-Skills Training Trap

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Abstract: With the 1998 signing of the Canada-Saskatchewan Labour Market Development Agreement, the federal government devolved EI training to the province. This roundtable session looks at the type of training being delivered and raises some issues that currently are being explored.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Canada lost many good manufacturing jobs, jobs that moved overseas to countries where salaries were lower. Considerable emphasis was placed on the creation of low-wage precarious jobs as a way to deal with the resulting unemployment. Historically, training coming from the federal Unemployment Insurance (UI) program focused on short-term training for low-skill jobs. Much of this training did not lead to full-time employment and, seemingly, was designed to temporarily lower Canada's unemployment rate.

In December 1995, the Federal government announced that it would re-name Part I of the UI program (which involved insurance benefits) to Employment Insurance (EI). It would devolve Part II of the legislation (pertaining to training) to the provinces. A number of reasons were given for this change: the Charlottetown Accord of 1992, the 1995 Quebec referendum, and the pressure from Quebec and some of the other provinces to take jurisdictional control of labour market training (Bakvis & Aucoin, 2000).

The provinces were given three choices: they could manage the training using EI funds, they could co-manage this training with the federal government, or they could leave EI funded training with the federal government. Saskatchewan decided to manage the training itself, and in 1998 the *Canada-Saskatchewan Agreement on Labour Market Development* was signed. Saskatchewan decided not to administer the EI funds as a separate program but, instead, chose to add these funds to an existing training program. Named the CanSask program, it was to be geared mainly to two groups of people: those on social assistance and those on EI.

When the program began in Saskatchewan, it was housed in the Department of Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training. In 2002, it moved to the Department of Community Resources and Employment (DCRE—and formerly known as Social Services). In 2006, it moved to the Department of Advance Education and Employment.

There was considerable controversy over much of the training given to people on social assistance, particularly during its time at DCRE. Many people were tossed off social assistance, placed in inappropriate low-skills training and, subsequently, they became trapped in low-skills, low-wage contingent jobs. Because of this, I wanted to find out more about the training being given to unemployed workers on EI and to look at the outcome of this training.

Research Design

Building on a review of government documents and, at the time of this writing, interviews with 5 provincial government employees and 3 employees from CBOs, the purpose of my research is: (a) to examine Saskatchewan's training programs that emanate from EI training funds, and (b) to look at the types of jobs graduates of these programs obtain.

For the purpose of this conference, I am looking at the EI training funds offered through CanSask that are used for (a) purchased courses in training institutions, (b) Community Works, and (c) the Bridging program.

Purchased courses. The CanSask program purchases courses through both private and public training institutions both inside and outside the province. The courses purchased clearly are superior to the training that previously was provided by the Federal government. While high skill training is provided, some training in the low skills also is given. What type of jobs do people obtain after training? No one knows. CanSask does not track students once they enter a course. Some questions need to be asked. How can CanSask account for the funds if they do not track the students after the completion of training? How do they decide if the program is successful? Since Alberta and Manitoba (HRDC, 2000a, 2000b) track their clients, why is Saskatchewan unable to do so?

Community Works and Bridging program. These programs provide funds to CBOs and businesses to provide employment and on-the-job training for EI recipients. Do these programs simply provide staff for businesses and CBOs? How much training is provided? What type of skills? What percent of clients remain in the job when the subsidy runs out? Is this a legitimate way to spend the EI contributions of workers?

Conclusion

The above are a few of the questions that will be addressed as part of my research. It is anticipated that the research will be completed by the end of the summer of 2007.

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